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ABSTRACT

Job loss is a stressful event, partially because of the obvious stress of economic deprivation. However, research shows that job loss also has psychological effects. The impact of losing a job has been investigated in terms of personality (self esteem, mental health, and affective states) and in terms of the transitional stages of reactions to job and career loss over time (grief from the loss and stages of unemployment). Moderating factors have also been identified, such as social support and high activity level. Factors identified as intensifying negative feelings are a high degree of personal involvement with the job and concomitant domestic problems. Critical questions for future research concern elaboration of grief stages as they specifically relate to job loss, the role of social support as a buffer for some of the negative emotional consequences of job loss, and the effectiveness of coping strategies as other moderating factors. (The Index to the College of Administrative Science Reprint and Working Paper Series, The Ohio State University, is printed at the end of the article.) (YLB)

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**AFTER THE AX FALLS: RESEARCHING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL
IMPACT OF JOB LOSS AMONG PROFESSIONALS**

by

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ABSTRACT

The current economic climate has created intense interest in job loss among professionals. This paper reviews literature on the psychological impact of job loss on professionals and suggests research questions for future study. Critical questions concern elaboration of grief/loss stages, connections between grief/loss stages and stages of unemployment, the role of social support and the effectiveness of coping strategies.

In recent months white collar unemployment has reached the highest rates since the recession of 1973-75 and some economists predict that the current recession will see record numbers of managers and professionals lose their jobs (Wall Street Journal, 1981). It is clear that job loss among professionals is once again a topic of concern as it was during the aerospace layoffs in the early seventies.

The issue is perhaps even more critical at present, however, for three reasons. First, current layoffs of professionals are the result of cutbacks, mergers and economic turbulence that is relatively widespread across both public and private sectors, rather than concentrated in primarily one industry. Second, many economists project that economic turbulence and slow growth will create employment problems for professionals for some years to come (Crowley, 1972; Jahoda, 1981; Kelvin, 1980; Maurer, 1979). Finally, recent research on stressful life events (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1973) has suggested that events which are undesirable and unanticipated, such as job loss, are more likely to inflict negative emotional and physical consequences than events which are viewed as desirable (McFarlane, Norman, Streiner, Ranjan & Scott, 1980; Vinokur & Selzer, 1973). Therefore, job loss among professionals is an important concern of organizational researchers who wish to apply their efforts to practical and immediate organizational problems -- i.e., understanding how job loss affects professionals, and ultimately helping individuals and organizations to more effectively manage this stressful event.

The purpose of this paper is to review literature related to the psychological impact of job loss on professionals, and to propose critical research questions to guide us in future studies. What does job loss do to the individuals who experience it, i.e., what are the feelings and reactions? How might researchers proceed to study this important topic?

Literature on professional job loss

Much of the conceptual discussion of job loss has been generated from empirical studies as well as anecdotal accounts of individuals who have been terminated. This section combines a discussion of conceptual views and research on the impact of job loss. We discuss explanations of why job loss is a stressful event, and descriptions of how individuals are psychologically affected by it.

Job loss as a stressful event. Other than the obvious stress of economic deprivation, several reasons have been offered to explain why job loss is a stressful event. Freud (1930) noted that work was a person's strongest tie to reality. Jahoda (1981) has written of the latent consequences of employment, beyond making money, that explain why unemployment is psychologically destructive. Employment imposes a time structure on the waking day; it implies regularly shared experiences and contacts with people outside the nuclear family; it links individuals to goals and purposes beyond their own; and it defines aspects of personality, status and identity. Maurer (1979) states that work "...provides not simply a livelihood but an essential passage into the human community. It makes us less alone" (p. 1).

Wood (1975) points out that being terminated is traumatic because of the widespread value placed on work as the natural state whereby human beings reach their potential. Therefore, the unemployed person is without work, i.e., is not behaving "naturally", and thus is viewed as deviant. Termination affects settled expectations, and represents failure in the form of a step in the wrong direction while everyone else is moving ahead.

Stybel (1981) has noted that among managers, termination represents the "ultimate corporal punishment -- banishment...from the organization with little or no recourse to alter the sentence (p. 1)." He points out that the

severity of the trauma is reflected in the colloquial terms for firing such as "getting axed" or "walking the plank".

The psychological effects of job loss. There has been periodic interest in the effects of job loss since the Depression (Liem & Liem, 1979). A number of macro-level studies, most notably that by Brenner (1976), have linked unemployment with a variety of health and social problems including mental illness, suicide, child abuse, and admissions to prisons and mental hospitals. Studies on the individual impact of joblessness have emphasized blue collar workers and lower level white collar workers (Bakke, 1960; Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938; Kasl & Cobb, 1979; Mick, 1975; Seglow, 1970; Wedderburn, 1965). Studies that focus specifically on professionals are rarer, though studies of unemployed scientists and managers were published at the time of the aerospace cutbacks in the late 60's and early 70's. These studies provide descriptive data on characteristics of unemployed engineers (Naughton, 1972), the job search process (Dyer, 1972; Gutteridge and Ullman, 1974) and factors related to re-employment (Eaton, 1971; Perline & Presley, 1973). Considerably less attention has been devoted to the psychological impact of job loss.

One reason for the blue collar emphasis may be that for these workers job loss is presumed to lead to unemployment with all of the attendant economic and psychological implications. Managers and professionals, on the other hand, are assumed to be more cushioned from unemployment, perhaps by advance notice, generous severance arrangements, savings, etc. Furthermore, managers are often viewed as being stressed by wielding the ax rather than by falling under it and thus much of the managerial literature deals with how to fire rather than how to be fired (Wood, 1975). Finally, despite the psychological attachment that many managers have to the work role, being fired

has long been accepted as an inherent risk of managerial life. Those who protest the termination are often viewed as not resilient enough to pick up and go on from this event and therefore are all the more "deserving" of termination (Wood, 1975).

Six empirical studies were found that singled out managers and professionals to examine the psychological impact of job loss (Fineman, 1979; Hartley, 1980; Hepworth, 1980; Powell & Driscoll, 1973; Ragland-Sullivan & Barglow, 1981; Swinburne, 1981). Four of the studies are from Great Britain, which probably reflects Britain's economic retrenchment predating the current U.S. recession. Observations of professional outplacement counselors form the basis for conceptual discussion of the grief process associated with jobs loss (Jones, 1979; Stybel, 1981).

Hartley (1980) found no difference between employed and unemployed British managers on a measure of self-esteem. Among those unemployed, self-esteem did not correlate with length of time unemployed, but those in training programs showed higher self-esteem. Unemployed managers were, however, found to be more ready to take risks. Based on interviews, she identified a typology of self-esteem expression during unemployment: 1) low self-esteem -- deprecatory remarks, low morale, depression, low energy, pessimism; 2) defensively high self-esteem -- unwillingness to discuss difficulties of the predicament, bravado-type optimism and self-confidence, externalization and rationalization of problems and projection onto other family members; 3) intermittently-reduced self-esteem -- bouts of decreased self-esteem prompted by disappointments, short-lived depression; 4) high or moderate self-esteem -- optimism, enthusiasm, even enjoyment of unemployment.

Powell and Driscoll (1973) studied unemployed scientists and engineers in the U.S. (n=75) and identified four stages which professionals

seem to go through if they are not able to find a job within a short period of time. These stages are: 1) relaxation and relief; 2) concerted effort at finding a job; 3) vacillation and doubt; 4) malaise and cynicism. They note the buffering effects of a supportive network of family and friends, a finding which has also emerged in studies of blue collar unemployed (Kasl & Cobb, 1979; Liem & Liem, 1979). These stages are similar but by no means identical to those observed in a classic study of blue collar workers (Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938).

Hepworth (1980) studied unemployed British managers (n=78) and found the best single predictor of self-reported mental health was whether or not a man felt his time was fully occupied. Length of unemployment was inversely correlated with mental health but causality cannot be inferred from the data.

Fineman (1979) studied unemployed managers in a public training program in Britain (n=25). Stress, as measured by self-reported non-psychotic symptoms, was found to be higher among those who were personally involved in the job, believed in their competence on the job, had concomitant domestic problems, failed at job applications and expressed feelings of hopelessness about the situation. The perception that opportunities existed and a confrontation approach to job search problems appeared to buffer stress.

Swinburne (1981) interviewed 20 unemployed British managers and found the most frequently-mentioned initial reactions were shock ("like losing a leg") and uncertainty. Her observation was that loss of self-respect was not as prevalent as intuitively expected. Degree of control, i.e., if the individual saw the event coming or had been unemployed before, appeared to mitigate negative reactions. Hartley's (1980) finding regarding the importance of activity was confirmed.

Based on case study interviews with 13 terminated faculty, Ragland-

Sullivan and Barglow (1981) found the most common descriptors of affective states were: depression, incompetence, anger, rage, rejection, powerlessness, frustration and self doubt. They observed that self-esteem seemed diminished . The extent to which individuals mourned the loss was dependent on the degree of commitment to and ego involvement with an academic career.

Turning to the grief/loss perspective, Stybel (1981) has proposed a transition stage perspective based on outplacement counseling experience with dismissed executives. He observed that terminated managers who make successful transitions go through identifiable stages similar to the grief stages identified by Kubler-Ross (1969) in her work on death and dying: 1) "it's not happening to me" -- blocking out the implications, sense of unreality, supreme confidence about being able to find another position, and unwillingness to jump into rigors of a job search; 2) "why did this happen to me?" -- anger, blame, turning to friendship and family; 3) "if only..." -- questioning competence, self-recrimination, guilt over real or imagined inadequacy; 4) "I'll show those SOB's" -- desire for revenge; 5) "it's over" -- depression, loss of appetite and loss of interest in sex; 6) "let's get on with it" -- acceptance, desire to learn from the event, seeing positive meaning. Stybel notes that while not all managers go through the stages in the order presented, he feels that those who make successful transition go through each phase at some time.

Jones (1979) also adopts a grief process viewpoint in his discussion of cases where there is not only job loss but loss of a career. When structural unemployment occurs, as in the case of teachers, termination may mean involuntary career change as well. He cites Engel (1964) as one conceptual framework for relating grief processes to career loss. Grief stages proposed by Engel are: 1) shock and disbelief, inability to grasp the reality

of the situation; 2) developing awareness, sadness mixed with guilt, shame, helplessness, hopelessness, self-blame, anger at society and others and general feelings of emptiness; 3) bargaining-fantasy deals; "if I can just have another six months I'll be ready"; 4) depression, silence, cutting off relationships, generally retreating into a world of solitude; 5) restitution and recovery, resolution of grief as indicated by the ability to remember comfortably and realistically both the pleasure and disappointments of the lost relationship. Jones suggests these grief stages as possible reactions, but notes that people will not necessarily experience each stage described nor will they experience them in the order described. Jones does not address the issue of successful transition.

In summary, Table 1 lists the concepts which have been identified and the findings which have emerged from these studies. While these studies are provocative, there is insufficient evidence to draw conclusions in any area. Researchers have looked at the impact of job loss in terms of personality (self-esteem, mental health, affective states) and the transitional stages of reactions over time (grief/loss and stages of unemployment.) Moderating factors were also identified (e.g., social support, concomitant domestic problems). For moderating factors, a + sign indicates the factor has a buffering effect for negative reactions and a - sign indicates that factor intensified negative feelings.

Critical questions for future research

The foregoing discussion suggests several promising directions for future research. The critical questions concern elaboration of grief/loss stages, the potential connection between grief/loss stages and stages of unemployment, the role of social support, and identification of other factors in addition to social support which may moderate the psychological distress of

job loss. In closing, some recommendations about sample selection are offered.

A provocative theme identified in this discussion is that subsequent to job loss, individuals pass through stages of reactions and feelings analogous to the grief/loss process associated with death (Kubler-Ross, 1969). However, we are just beginning to describe these stages as they specifically relate to job loss. There must be considerable variation in how these stages are experienced, as well as the duration and order of these stages, but we do not know very much about the individual and environmental determinants of this variation. One suggestion offered by Jones (1979) is that feelings of grief/loss may be more severe for the individual who not only loses a job but a career as well. Furthermore, it has been suggested that conscious awareness and discussion of these grief stages is necessary to "successful" transition (Stybel, 1981) but empirical tests of this observation are needed.

1. What are the individual and environmental factors that influence the nature and intensity as well as the number and order of the grief/loss stages?
2. In what sense is passing through these stages "necessary" to "successful" transition?
 - a. Are individuals who acknowledge these stages more successful in some way than those who do not experience this process? For example, does feeling the loss and resolving the anger contribute in some way to a successful transition?
 - b. What is a "successful" transition? Is it minimizing unemployment or avoiding it altogether; lessening the severity or duration of psychological distress; expressing subsequent career/life satisfaction; or is it simply what Engel (1964) has suggested, i.e., being able to remember comfortably and realistically both the pleasure and disappointment of the previous job?

Stybel (1981) implies that passage through these stages is a prerequisite to satisfactory reemployment. This "passage" is obviously not the only factor affecting reemployment, however. Some of those who grieve will

also be unemployed, especially given the present state of the economy. Furthermore, there has been no attempt to connect the grief stages of job loss (Jones, 1979; Stybel, 1981) with stages observed over the duration of unemployment (Powell & Driscoll, 1973). For example, the initial denial phase identified by Stybel (1981) appears quite different conceptually from the relaxation and relief stage that Powell & Driscoll (1973) have discussed despite the fact these stages were observed at similar times relative to the termination decision. Furthermore, we don't know how grief/loss stages might differ when they are accompanied by unemployment. For example, being unemployed might considerably shorten the denial phase because it might be harder to deny what is happening when faced with the cold reality of being unemployed. The intensity and duration of the anger phase might be increased if one is unemployed because the individual has two reasons to be angry, not only losing a job but also being unemployed. In addition, the duration of unemployment could prolong or intensify the grief/process.

3. Are there connections between the grief/loss stages and the stages of reaction to being unemployed?
4. Do individuals who lose their jobs and go directly to another job experience grief/loss stages differently than those who lose their jobs and become unemployed?
5. Among those unemployed, is duration/stage of unemployment related to the grief/loss stages?

Another important concept is social support. It has been found that social support acts as a buffer for some of the negative emotional consequences of job loss. There is, however, little specification as to how social support operates, or what groups provide what type of support. For example, Hanlon (1980) found that parents provided financial support, friends provided information and both parents and friends provided emotional support.

It has also been suggested that the type of support needed differs with the grief/loss stage. For example, Stybel (1981) notes that in the anger phase, moral support from family and friends is important, but that coworkers should not necessarily support the terminated employee's hostile or negative view of the organization. Powell and Driscoll (1973) have pointed out that the longer unemployment continues, the more it strains the very relationships needed for support.

6. Specifically, what is the buffering effect of social support for professionals? Are those who have supportive social networks less depressed, angry, less likely to become discouraged in the job search process?

7. Are there differences in the nature and sources of social support based on the grief/loss or unemployment stage an individual is experiencing?

8. Can institutional sources of support, such as 40 Plus clubs or outplacement programs, substitute for social support that is unavailable from family and friends?

In addition to social support, Table 1 suggests other moderating factors which suggest coping strategies, e g., keeping fulling occupied. In addition, several studies suggested other strategies for reducing psychological distress and "working through" the grief process, but the relative effectiveness of these coping strategies have not been systematically examined.

9. What is the relative effectiveness of various coping strategies for alleviating psychological distress associated with job loss?

Finally, some suggestions about sample selection are in order. With the exception of two women (Fineman, 1979) the samples were all male. Given that women may be at a disadvantage based on length of service considerations which may effect termination decisions, it would be important to include women

in future samples. In addition, participants were not selected on the basis of reason for job loss, i.e., termination for poor performance versus structurally-induced termination (economic cutbacks, mergers, reorganizations). It is very possible that the psychological impact is different for someone terminated due to economically-based reasons than for someone whose performance is lacking or whose skills are no longer appropriate to the organization. Finally, public and private sector differences have not been explored. Civil servants may enter their careers expecting a lifelong commitment to public service. Therefore, their assumptions may be more traumatically disrupted by termination than those of a manager who expects a certain amount of cross-organizational mobility and may have changed jobs and/or careers previously.

In conclusion, it is clear the job loss can provoke psychological turmoil but we are just beginning to understand the implications for managers and professionals. Given the current economic situation, there exists a tremendous opportunity for organizational researchers to tap into naturally-occurring opportunities to conduct longitudinal studies of the job loss experiences of this population. The research questions posed here are intended to focus our efforts to understand and more effectively manage the psychological stress of job loss among professionals.

Table I
Research Findings on the
Psychological Impact of Job Loss Among Professionals

Personality

Self-esteem:

No differences in self-esteem between unemployed and employed managers; length of unemployment unrelated to self-esteem; self-esteem was higher for those in training programs. Typology of self-esteem expression during unemployment: low self-esteem; defensively high self-esteem; intermittent reduced self-esteem; high to moderate self-esteem (Hartley, 1980).

Case study observations suggest lowered self-esteem (Ragland-Sullivan & Barglow, 1981).

Mental health:

Length of unemployment inversely correlated with mental health (Hepworth, 1980).

Affective states:

Depression, sense of incompetence, anger, rejection, powerlessness, frustration, self-doubt (Ragland-Sullivan & Barglow, 1981).

Transitional Stages

Stages of unemployment:

Relaxation and relief; concerted effort at finding job; vacillation and doubt; malaise and cynicism (Powell & Driscoll, 1973).

Initial reactions:

Shock and uncertainty -- "like losing a leg" (Swinburne, 1981).

Grief/loss stages:

"It's not happening to me; why did this happen to me?; if only...; I'll show those S.O.B.'s; it's over; let's get on with it" (Stybel, 1981).

Shock and disbelief; developing awareness, guilt, anger; bargaining-fantasy deals; depression-cutting of relationships; restitution and recovery (Engel, 1964 cited in Jones, 1979).

Moderating Factors

- (+) Social support (Powell & Driscoll, 1973; Ragland-Sullivan & Barglow, 1981).
- (+) Activity, fully-occupied time (Hepworth, 1980; Swinburne, 1981).
- (+) Perceived opportunities, confrontation approach to job search problems (Fineman, 1979).
- (+) Control (advance notice, previous unemployment) (Swinburne, 1981).
- (-) Job involvement (Fineman, 1979; Ragland-Sullivan & Barglow, 1981).
- (-) Belief in competence in job, concomitant domestic problems, failure in job applications, feelings of hopelessness (Fineman, 1979).

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